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STATE HEALTH OFFICER CALLS ON ALL CALIFORNIANS TO HELP INFANTS GET A HEALTHY START IN LIFE *California Observes Black Infant Health Week – Feb. 19 - 25*

SACRAMENTO - State Public Health Officer Dr. Mark Horton today called on family members, friends and co-workers of all expectant mothers to encourage them to visit their doctor regularly during pregnancy and practice healthy behaviors.

"All of us have a role and responsibility to promote the health of the next generation of Californians," Horton said. "All babies deserve a healthy start in life, and we are committed to improving the health and well-being of mothers and their children."

Through a proclamation issued by Gov. Schwarzenegger, California marks the observance of Black Infant Health Week from Feb. 19 to 25. This annual event raises awareness about the importance of improving healthy births in the African-American community.

Infant mortality rates for African-American infants have declined from a rate of 15.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1994 to 12.3 deaths in 2003. Despite this improvement, African-American infants are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday as white infants, who had an infant mortality rate of 4.5 per 1,000 live births in 2003. African-American women are also three times more likely to suffer a pregnancy-related death than white women, with a pregnancy related mortality rate of 32.2 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to a rate of 10.9 for white women during 2001-2003.

"Although major improvements in prenatal and maternity care have led to an overall reduction in infant mortality in California in the last decade, the rate of deaths among African-American infants is still a concern," Horton said.

A variety of factors have led to this disproportionate rate of infant mortality, including poverty, lack of access to early prenatal care, unplanned pregnancy, lack of sufficient food and preconception health. There are also disproportionately high rates of premature delivery and low birth weight among African-American infants. In 2004, 12.6 percent of African-American newborns were born underweight, compared with 6.3 percent of white newborns. This condition is a factor in early death and can lead to long-term mental and physical impairment among children.

"To ensure that a baby gets a healthy start in life, it's important for expectant mothers to avoid smoking, drinking or illegal drugs, and to see their doctor regularly," Horton said. "There are also state programs that can help."

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Access to appropriate health care services is essential for infants and children. Gov. Schwarzenegger has designated \$72.2 million in his proposed state budget to ensure that every child who is eligible for either Medi-Cal or Healthy Families is enrolled.

In addition, to improve the birth outcomes among African-American infants, the California Department of Health Services implemented the Black Infant Health (BIH) Program in 1989. At the time, the infant mortality rate among African-Americans was 19.2 deaths per 1,000 live births. The program is currently established in 17 cities and counties where more than 90 percent of African-American infant births and deaths occur.

Local BIH programs offer a variety of support services that provide pregnant women and parenting mothers with access to adequate prenatal, postnatal and pediatric care, including:

- Identifying “at-risk” pregnant and parenting African-American women and providing them with assistance in using appropriate medical care and other family support services.
- Providing case management services to ensure the provision of appropriate pediatric care through the first year of infants’ lives.
- Educating pregnant and parenting African-American women and the entire community about the causes of infant mortality and the relationship between low birth weight and infant survival.
- Improving the nutritional status of pregnant African-American women by determining the prevalence of anemia and developing strategies aimed at reducing anemia.
- Encouraging awareness among the African-American community of the importance of placing infants on their backs when they sleep to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Other efforts to reduce infant and maternal mortality include:

- The California Pregnancy-Related and Pregnancy-Associated Mortality Project seeks to determine risk factors for pregnancy-related mortality, including race/ethnic differences in mortality, by reviewing medical records of women who died within one year of a live birth or fetal death.
- The Fetal Infant Mortality Review program uses local case review teams comprised of community leaders, medical care providers, public health and social service staff and consumers to review cases of fetal and infant death in their communities and develop interventions to reduce these deaths.
- The SIDS program provides an outreach campaign to increase public awareness about how to reduce the risk of SIDS among all groups, with an emphasis on African-American families.